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ABSTRACT

The best way to understand and appreciate the forms and structures of autobiography is through the creation of lifewriting stories--memoirs, portraits, reminiscences, anecdotes, family histories, etc., which provide entry points for exploration in life experiences. Lifewriting texts provide the best point of penetration for the developing reader to come to understand not merely the nature of the autobiographical genre, but also to move towards more developed and sophisticated responses to literature in general. An examination of the research on autobiographical writing can lead to a greater understanding of how writers create the illusion of memory in the creation of a literary "self." In a lifewriting class the move from writing to reading is inevitable. The collaborative mode of composition presents the individual writer with a variety of texts in which other writers have tackled similar methodological questions in regard to getting their life stories down on paper. Initially each participant reads to discover alternative forms of presentation. Within the confines of the lifewriting group the texts that are read, appreciated, and criticized are fairly short and simple texts written by the other members of the group. But the skills and attitudes learned in this situation have a natural carry-over to the reading of more sophisticated life stories and memoirs in published texts. The structure which brings people together to write about their own experiences and share their reading and writing is very close to the type of primary classroom now labeled "whole language." (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (RAE)

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LIFEWITING AND TEXT CREATION

Developing Response Through Autobiographical Writing

by

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Lifewriting and Text Creation: Developing Response
Through Autobiographical Writing

Syd Butler and Roy Bentley

ABSTRACT

Our aim is to show that the best way to understand and appreciate the forms and structures of autobiography is through the creation of lifewriting stories--memoirs, portraits, reminiscences, anecdotes, family histories, etc., which provide entry points for exploration in life experiences. We present the proposition that lifewriting texts provide the best point of penetration for the developing reader to come to understand not merely the nature of the autobiographical genre, but also to move towards more developed and sophisticated responses to literature in general.

INTRODUCTION

Our topic is autobiographical literature. We start with some consideration of the nature of this particular genre, discuss the varieties of response to the reading of it, and then suggest how this response might be developed through the writing of life stories. This sequence is the exact opposite of the process implied in a conference devoted to reading and response. Indeed, we might both be accused of putting the cart before the horse, but our work with a number of writing groups for elderly people and for management personnel in government and business (which initially brought us together in a shared interest in the power of personal writing) has shown us that Lifewriting not only enables our participants to perceive the patterns and values of their life experiences

but also leads them directly to the forms and structures of autobiography, story telling and literature in general.

WHAT IS LIFEWRITING?

Lifewriting encompasses the creation of memoirs, experiences, and thoughts about one's life, or even about one event or incident in that life. Lifewriting may range from the capturing of a wisp of memory to a chapter in a personal or family history. It can range from a few lines of prose or poetry to the writing of a full-scale autobiography. Lifewriting deals with the motivations and reactions to past and present living, and may help the lifewriter to understand better the prospects of possible, probable, or even fantastic futures. The writing of life stories further leads the participants to discover and explore the meanings and values of their lives.

As our groups write, share, and publish their own life stories, so too, they develop an interest in the life stories, not only of other participants, but also of more famous people. Hence, the writing of life stories, *lifewriting*, has created an initial interest in the reading of autobiographies. Surprisingly, in the case of our lifewriting groups, this interest sometimes derives from a certain semi-professional jealousy, especially with the older, retired adults, who as they developed an ability to create and structure their own stories, looked somewhat enviously at those authors who were able to make money out of the same process. The attitude reminds one of Henry Meyers' definition of the artist as one who won't prostitute his art, except for money.

By what seems in retrospect to have been a very natural stage of evolution, our lifewriting groups develop into *writing-and-reading* groups, although we should point out that an important foundation for our groups, always^s, is a strong element of *talk*. It is talk which provides the fertilizer which enables both lifewriting and lifereading to flourish side by side. This connection--talking, writing, reading-- is worth exploring

in this context, especially in the light of recent research, not only in the field of literature, but also in the disciplines of anthropology, developmental psychology, and gerontology, which have all noted the therapeutic use of life review in both oral and written forms.

THE FORMS AND STRUCTURES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

First, let us look at the nature of autobiography itself. The perennial question is still ^{with} ~~wist~~ us: should autobiography even be considered as a form of literature? It is a question worth exploring because depending on how we view autobiography will determine the reader's stance towards the genre and will ultimately affect the way we promote and develop the reader's response. Take, for example, James Olney (1980), a critic who has been in the vanguard of theoretical approaches to autobiography, who wrote: "Autobiography is not so much a mode of literature as literature is a mode of autobiography." According to Olney, the history of autobiography developed with a complete, naive unconsciousness of the issues that now are confronted by literary critics:

There was nothing problematical about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception. . . the fact that the individual was himself narrating the story of himself had no troubling philosophical, psychological, literary, or historical implications.

THE TRUTH OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

One widely-assumed, differentiating characteristic of autobiography concerns truth. The truthfulness of the autobiographer has long been regarded as the mainstay of autobiography, what Philippe Lejeune (1971), in *L'Autobiographie en France*, termed "le pacte autobiographique," or the writer's intention, and the reader's assumption, that the autobiographer at least tries to tell the truth, and believes that what he writes is factually

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accurate. On the other hand, Scholes and Kellogg (1968), in *The Nature of Narrative*, are probably much more realistic when they point out that "all knowing and telling are subject to the conventions of art."

Quite early in the history of prose narrative ingenious artists played on this belief in order to give a false credibility to ^{their} ~~his~~ fiction, as when Defoe published the stories of Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders as their own personal stories, or Sterne made an extended eight-volume joke in giving the world the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy. Even Dickens, a century later, was not above using this framing device in giving us *The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences, and Observations of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery (Which He never meant to have Published on any Account)*.

Yet the pact still holds sway in the public mind, even if there are some novelists who "cheat" a little. Philip Guedalla regarded all biography as "a region bounded on the north by history, on the south by fiction, on the east by obituary, and on the west by tedium." Why else would autobiography find its place among the works of history and geography on the shelves of a public library? Even if we look at the titles beginning with the word "autobiography" we find that we can read the autobiography of a cad, a fisherman, a forester, a runaway slave, a sexually emancipated communist woman, a trial lawyer, a Yaqui poet, an adventurer, an American communist, an English soldier in the U.S. army, an American novelist, and ^{an} M.P. (Indian), England's first woman judge, and the woman the Gestapo called the White Mouse. The assumption with these titles is that the reader will find the truth about the particular categories of human endeavour, and that the personal life of the author is not at stake in these works.

Or we check the "facts" of the personal lives in the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin, Bertrand Russell, Haile Selassie, G. K. Chesterton, Harry S. Truman,

John McAdam, Knute K. Rockne, Malcolm X., Oliver Goldsmith (the Canadian grand-nephew, not the original), William Carlos Williams, Agatha Christie, Noel Coward, Charles Darwin, James Galway, John Stuart Mill, Victor Pritchett, Eleanor Roosevelt and Frank Lloyd Wright. But even here we need a note of caution when we find the *Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*, or the autobiographies of Jane Pittman and Alice B. Toklas.

Our list above shows the wide range of works that can be considered as the "My Story" approach of public celebrities (the revelations, as one cynic suggested, that reveal nothing bad about a writer except his memory). Such works may indeed be read as historical documents or case histories, and of course there is something of the *National Enquirer* appeal of being able to peep, although very selectively, into the private lives of famous people.

With such works the reader's expectation is that the private life may be interesting but subordinate in importance to the background information to the story of the writer's claim to fame. What then are we to expect when we encounter autobiographies of such phenomena as *dying, science, the Supreme Court, the working class, of values?*

These lists bear out the words of John Grigg, in the *Sunday Times* (28 February, 1962) who said: "Autobiography is now as common as adultery, and hardly less reprehensible."

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE MORALIST VIEW

There is; another dimension to the solely informational view of autobiography. Indeed, even before the term *autobiography* was coined, Dr. Johnson, in his *Rambler*, No.60 (Oct.13, 1750), claimed: "There has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and

faithful narrative would not be useful." With this utilitarian view of literature Johnson recognized that in the middle of the eighteenth century the lives of ordinary people might serve the same exemplary purposes as had done the hagiography of earlier centuries, because, he continued: "We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desires, and seduced by pleasure."

When such a cautionary tale was told by the main actor himself, Johnson suggested that this self-written biography would have even more value, in fact, underlining the truthfulness of the narrative, for "Those relations are therefore of most value in which the writer tells his own story." Of course, Johnson, the moralist, was astute enough to recognize that such a biography might be written for self-serving motives:

He that writes an apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, to recommend himself for favour, is, indeed, always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admiration of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves the account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell the truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb. (*Idler*, No.84, November 24, 1759)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE READER'S STANCE

If one were to regard autobiography simply as a historiographical document then the reading of this genre would be treated in the same way as any other "content-subject" text, with an emphasis on reading for information, to understand and retain the facts. The mental act of reading at this level of comprehension becomes the work of organizing information--recognizing the main ideas, listing supporting details,

illustrations, and examples. and relating the information to the reader's own schemata, and the wider field knowledge.

Literary biography and autobiography, of course, have long been a source of information to support the critical analysis of the author's literary works. Moreover, the autobiographist who has already established a reputation in the writing of imaginative literature may be presumed to have brought the same level of literary skill to the writing of the personal life story. Such biographies are valued for their own sake and not for any extrinsic reason.

But there are differences in the stances adopted by the reader towards an autobiography parallel the distinction made by James Britton (1978) in his model of written discourse functions developed for the Writing Research Unit of the London University Institute of Education 1966. Britton distinguished writing in the "transactional mode," when writer and reader are both participants in the transaction of information, which for its validity can be tested for its truthfulness against events and phenomena in the real world. In contrast, at the other end of the spectrum of language functions, language in the "poetic mode" demands that both writer and reader adopt "spectator" roles to view the literary manifestation of experience created by the writer's language.

In a later essay, Britton (1984) shows that this distinction between verbal objects and verbal transactions can be seen in the developing language of a two-year-old. He also quotes from Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (1975) in which this structuralist critic shows that *The Odyssey* employs two "major types of speech" which he distinguishes as "speech-in-action" and "speech-as-narrative," the difference between informational and narrational discourse. Britton makes a statement about the nature of narrative art which will take on a special importance when we consider the phenomenon of life review:

If our verbal transactions are woven into the network of interactions that make up the fabric of human life, the verbal object in contrast aims at

creating a unity that is isolated from the traffic of daily existence, formally satisfying--*an experience of order*--a unity by virtue of the way all its elements are appropriate to each other and to the whole. In its fully developed form, then it is a work of art, incorporating modes of construction common to the arts in general. . . .

The difference between treating autobiography as a historical or sociological document and as a work of literature is the difference between what Louise Rosenblatt (1985) calls "efferent" and "aesthetic" reading, where the efferent is the expected response to the verbal transaction and aesthetic, as we might expect, to the verbal object. Britton's distinction, then, might resolve the question about truth in autobiography, when he suggests that in responding to narrative discourse, what matters is not whether the events recounted are true or false, but whether "we recount them (or listen to them) as spectators or participants; and whenever we play the role of spectator of human affairs, we are in the position of literature."

We should be aware here that there may be a problem of nomenclature. It is impossible to discuss response to literature without referring to Louise Rosenblatt's (1938) *Literature As Exploration*, although her terms *efferent* and *aesthetic* to distinguish two types of reader's response come from her later work *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* ((1978). After more than four decades of pioneering the acceptance of her transactional theory of literature, Rosenblatt (1985) might feel justifiably aggrieved when her distinctions become blurred as her terms become equated with "information processing" and "literary criticism," while "transaction" becomes confused with "interaction." What is important in Rosenblatt's theory is that the nature of the response is not a quality inherent in the text, but is created by the transaction between text and individual reader, as she points out:

Both cognitive and affective aspects of consciousness are activated in the transaction with verbal signs. The difference between the two kinds of

reading lies in the reader's selective attention to what is being stirred up in the experiential reservoir. The predominantly efferent reader focuses attention on public meaning, abstracting what is to be retained after the reading--to be recalled, paraphrased, acted on, analyzed. In aesthetic reading, the reader's selective attention is focused primarily on what is being personally lived through, cognitively and affectively, *during* the reading event. The range of ideas, feelings, associations activated in the reservoir of symbolizations is drawn upon. (The reader may retain much afterwards, but that is not the differentiating aspect.) Any text (e.g. a sonnet or a story) can be read either way. Obviously, much reading falls near the middle of the continuum, with some degree of attention to the subordinate mode, but any reading event can be characterized as primarily efferent or aesthetic.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY:THE LITERARY VIEW

The past two decades have produced an increasing number of critical works dealing with autobiography as a literary genre in its own right, leading to a greater understanding of how writers create the illusion of memory in the creation of a literary "self." Elizabeth Bruss (1976), for example, sees the autobiographical act as "the interpretation of life that invests the past and 'self' with coherence and meaning." An important aspect of her analysis, as we shall see later in dealing with the reader's response, is that she regards the act of writing the autobiography as the discovery of its significance. In her view we can make an equation in which the act of composing *the text* equals the act of composing *the life* equals the act of composing the *self*.

James Olney (1980), in an introduction to an important collection of essays about the nature of the art of autobiography, suggests that the popularity of the genre derives from the modern preoccupation with the place of *self* in society and sees "the cultural origins of autobiography as the generic idea of selfhood in the West." Jerome Buckley (1984) also examines the nature of "the subjective impulse," taking the longer historical view in a survey of autobiography since 1800. Similarly, Cockshut (1984) has constructed a taxonomy of the various types of autobiography in nineteenth and twentieth-century England. Susanna Egan (1984) begins her work on *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* with a chapter on "the inevitability of fiction. Avrom Fleishman's (1983) *The Figures of Autobiography* is an examination of the language of self-writing in Victorian and Modern England in which he counters some of the difficulties in defining the genre, especially one in which there are no agreed norms. In his view the autobiographer necessarily creates a new self in the act of writing, and he presents the question of how the reader is to judge this creation: from the standard of objective truth; as a quest for meaning in life; as conventional markers or rhetorical gestures; or as the self-expression of a personal myth.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: SUB-CATEGORIES

There are two important examinations of sub-categories of autobiography which are well worth consideration, because both of these special types--childhood and womenhood--are featured strongly amongst the lifewriting stories produced in our adult groups.

Sidonie Smith's (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* deals with the questions inherent in self-representation, especially the problems of truthfulness and identity in the authentication of the self. But her work centres on "marginality and the fictions of self-representation." She quotes from Spengemann's *Forms of Autobiography* (1980) which presents a normative view of biography in which the model types are

invariably men (the androcentric paradigm): "The mass of women's lives seem doomed to remain silent, their autobiographies to remain unwritten, or when written and read to be labelled inferior." Nevertheless, as Smith shows, there are models of women's autobiography throughout the past five centuries by women "who chose to write and appropriated androcentric fictions as their templates for self-expression."

The other work which deserves our consideration is by fellow Canadian, Richard Coe. *When the Grass was Taller* (1984) looks at the experience of childhood as it is portrayed in many examples of childhood reminiscences, a genre which he labels simply as the "Childhood." The distinction he draws between the fully-fledged autobiography and the Childhood is an important one and depends largely on the role of memory. While the adult autobiography may rest on the assertion that what is said is what is believed to be true, the Childhood takes on a note of interrogation, becoming more of "a quest, a search for understanding . . . there lurks the nagging doubt whether that past, that alien self had any substance, or value, or even ascertainable reality." Coe's survey takes in Childhoods written in several different languages and in many different cultures, dispelling some of the myths which he had expected to find manifested in these Childhoods, showing some fascinating commonality in patterns of experience and discovering some essential cultural differences in the ways writers look back on their childhoods.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND LIFE REVIEW

A problem faced by any critical examination of autobiography is the lack of a clear demarcation between different forms of life narratives. The label "Autobiography" is clearly no guarantee of a factual life story, but neither is "Novel" guaranteed to be free of the author's life experience. Novelists, like other human beings, can benefit

from the process of life review, with the added advantage that they have a ready-made vehicle to give it expression.

A quarter of a century ago Robert Butler (1963) recognized the value of life review as a universal occurrence in older people. Previously the tendency of garrulous old people to live in the past had been perceived to be a symptom of psychological dysfunction. In such a view "reminiscence becomes a pejorative, suggesting preoccupation, musing, aimless wandering of the mind." Butler, however, was able to show the use of life review as a potential for "personality reorganization," a process by which young or old could come to terms with life, and especially with approaching death. Butler suggests that when the life review means the reintegration of life experiences and values the result is positive:

As the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed, and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs, often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experience may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meaning to one's life.

LIFE REVIEW PORTRAYED IN THE NOVEL

We can find a dramatization of this process of life within the pages of a familiar novel. George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* has a main character called George Bowling who says to the reader:

The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time. I suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that happened twenty years ago, and yet most of the time it's got no reality, it's just a set of facts that you've learned, like a lot of stuff in a history book. Then some

chance sight or sound or smell, especially smell, sets you going, and the past doesn't merely come back to you, you're actually *in* the past.

The action of the novel takes George back to the scenes of his childhood in pre-1914 rural England as he tries to escape temporarily from the mortgage-ridden, war-threatened life of the suburbia of the nineteen-thirties. Of course, George is doomed to disappointment. As Thomas Wolfe and the Beatles made very clear, you can't go home again. The scenes that George could re-create very vividly in his imagination no longer existed in his reality.

Yet it was clear to Julian Symons, as he said in an interview with Stephen Wadhams for the CBC radio program *Remembering Orwell* (1984), that *Coming Up for Air* was obviously a concealed autobiographical account of Orwell's childhood. When Symons challenged Orwell about it, Orwell admitted that he really was not a novelist because he did not have the interest in character and incident that makes a true novelist. "But," Orwell said, "one of the problems is one's always got masses of experience like the stuff about childhood and fishing in that book, which one wants to use and can't get rid of except in the form of fiction." According to Symons, Orwell, having got rid of all that childhood stuff, was then able to go on to write *Animal Farm*.

Another more unusual form of life review takes place in *Cat's Eye*, the recent novel by Margaret Atwood. Here the fiftyish painter, Elaine, is back in Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her work. The familiar scenes of her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood trigger a bookful of reminiscences as Elaine recalls the incidents of her growing up. As she says in her preface, "I began to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of

another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away."

In Atwood's novel, Elaine's layers of past come floating to the surface, in anticipation that some of her demons will return to the present to haunt her. But instead of a dramatic confrontation, the climax of the novel comes with the opening of her show, for her paintings over the years have captured and laid to rest these ancient ghosts. The reader recognizes in the verbal descriptions of her paintings the scenes and figures that had figured in her reminiscing. And the retrospective exhibition really is a form of life review through a chronological sequence of paintings.

The key incident in Elaine's childhood had been the teasing of her young girlfriends which left her nearly frozen in a ravine below a bridge. So her last painting is entitled *Unified Field Theory* which reflects this scene and gives both Elaine and the reader a new understanding of the incident that had been described earlier in the action of the novel. But the exhibition fails to resurrect the hated and feared Cordelia, and only a visit to the actual scene brings the novel to a close with a sense of Elaine's reconciliation with her past.

THE RE-CREATION OF THE SELF

Recognizing life review as a form of life narrative by which a person, or a fictional character, learns to come to terms with life, better to understand the patterns and shaping forces of his or her life and to recognize the turning points of that life's progress, provides us with a basis for reading and judging autobiography, not simply as a chronology of ascertainable facts, but as the record of the writer's struggle to understand life itself. While, as readers, we may be attracted to a particular autobiography because it treats of the sort of life ostensibly interesting to us, whether it is the life of a film star, or scientist, or persecuted homosexual, or battered wife, or

whatever, we can also appreciate the human struggle in the effort needed to recall and recollect for posterity.

Henry James once said that stories happen to people who know how to tell them. It is through life-storying or lifewriting that people learn to tell their stories, and to create and integrate their life experiences. Not everyone can produce a full-scale autobiography, just as not everyone can climb Mount Everest, but most are ~~not~~ capable of walking up some of the foothills, and everyone is capable, with proper guidance and support, of telling or writing parts of their life history.

FROM WRITING TO READING

R.V.Cassill, the American novelist and teacher of writing, in a conversation recorded in George Garret's (1972) *Craft So Hard To Learn*, said:

Writing and reading are not neatly separable activities. We use the same disciplines, the same leaps of the imagination to read well as we do in writing. . . . It's a part of my method as a teacher to keep sending the young writer to this book or that book or another book to see things that are related to his own writing; not just to find models that he can copy, but to find the extensions and dimensions of human experience. What I do think is that when one increases the scope of his own craft and learns to write better, he also learns to read better. It pays off both ways.

In a lifewriting class the move from writing to reading is inevitable. The collaborative mode of composition presents the individual writer with a variety of texts in which other writers have tackled similar methodological questions in regard to getting their life stories down on paper. Initially, then, each participant reads to discover alternative forms of presentation. However, as the struggle with creation proceeds, the concern grows, not so much with the model, but with the effectiveness of the model.

From our experience the writer's own group may not provide sufficiently authoritative models of sustained lifewriting. So we find that examples of published lifewriting from earlier or other groups gain importance and significance. These lifewritings are read avidly, with an eye both to literary construction and artistic impact. The response is intense, at both the individual and group level. The individual response is reflective, assessive, and comparative. The group response tends to be tactics-oriented. The tactics of device or construction become piano scales to precede further explorations in their own writing.

The reading of published lifewritings provides standards which motivate lifewriters to revise, expand, and develop the range of their writing. As such revision becomes more sophisticated, moving away from the prettying up or correcting of the raw utterance, we have the transmogrification of the lifewriter into artist. Further, for the committed there is a desire to see how *real* writers have tackled the problem of expressing the self into an artistic creation. Now we have the move to look again at the novel, the poem, and the play--even if not specifically and directly autobiographical--as the metamorphosis of personal experience into literature. In short, the nature of the response changes in two ways. First, there is the search for greater understanding of technique; second, and more important, there is the appreciation of the spirit of self that the writer has tried to convey.

LIFEWITING IN ACTION

The heart of the lifewriting class is the individual's struggle to recapture and express his or her own life experiences. But in our groups we reject the traditional view of the writer as a solitary figure engaged in a lonely endeavour. The image of the starving poet writing by candlelight in a low-ceilinged garret is no longer valid. Lessons from research in the teaching of written composition support the theory that "writing floats on a sea of talk." In a lifewriting group, whether in a school or community

centre, in a college or a prison, the participants soon find that talking with other people about their life experiences and sharing their reactions to remembered events actually help the writer to reconstruct experiences more completely and more comprehensively. The social processes of a lifewriting group serve to stimulate and maintain momentum in the capturing of these memories. The group work provides not only an important therapeutic and social occasion, but also direct assistance in the framing and rehearsing of what is to be put down on paper.

In a lifewriting group, the participants are learning not simply to become writers or autobiographers, but also to become listeners and critics of each other's writings. As they become writers, so they become critics of writing. At first, within the confines of the lifewriting group, the texts that they read, appreciate, and criticize will be the fairly short and simple texts written by the other members of the group. But the skills and attitudes learned in this situation have a natural carry-over to the reading of more sophisticated life stories and memoirs in published texts. Here is the opportunity for cooperative and collaborative criticism to develop within the safe and secure boundaries of the supportive group.

LIFEWITING IN SCHOOLS

Maxine Hairston (1982), in her article "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," defines the characteristics of the emerging modern paradigm in the teaching of written composition which over the past two decades has begun to supplant the "current-traditional mode." The twelve principal features which she lists are in the main exemplified in the lifewriting class, especially the focus on the writing process, the strategies for invention and discovery, the view of writing as a recursive process, the idea that the teacher should be participant rather than an instructor, and especially the belief that writing is a holistic activity that involves the intuitive and non-rational as well as the rational faculties. Perhaps the most important

principle underlying these features is the spirit of cooperation and collaboration which is a necessary condition of the group process. Just as important, this principle leads directly into the reading process, especially when we consider that the reading process includes not merely the decoding of text, but also the sharing and discussion of responses and reactions to the story and its structure. Along with the writing process, the participants develop their abilities and interests in forming and sharing critical responses to the reading. In effect, lifewriting becomes lifereading.

Of course, the lifewriting group is not an exact model of a typical secondary school English classroom. There are no set books, no assigned readings, no given essay topics, no exams, no marks, and no grades. And yet the structure which brings people together to write about their own experiences, read their own choice of books, and share both their reading and writing through informal talk, is very close to the type of primary classroom we now label *Whole Language*.

THE RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

Although the promoting of response to reading is not an explicit goal of a lifewriting program, it has been interesting to observe the developing of varied responses to the reading of stories. Within the group, *le pacte autobiographique* holds sway because there is an assumption that each of the lifewriters is trying to express the truth about remembered experience. Discussion of text usually focuses on the techniques of narrative--the use of details, the clarification of meaning, the structuring of events, and, most interesting, what information the reader needs to understand and what information the reader can bring to the text. But even at this level there is often an admission that where memory fails the writer is able to create, in fact, *has* to create "facts" in order to complete a story. There is also discussion about how changing or re-ordering a sequence of events changes the overall meaning in altering the focus of an experience.

With regard to response to the reading of formal autobiographies, it is perhaps too early to make any categorical statements. Generally, it seems that most discussion centres on questions of credibility of events, and especially the expression of admiration and awe for the professional writer who seems to remember a lifetime of incidents. Perhaps the most common level of response is to treat the text almost as if were a personal correspondence in a direct one-to-one telling of a personal story. In Rosenblatt's terms the bias in the lifewriters' responses towards the reading of formal autobiography is towards the efferent. The interest in the genre is primarily a human interest, not a literary one. Yet overall, the main criterion of judgment is the extent to which an autobiography seems to create a sense of self, the feeling that the reader has been in contact, albeit vicariously, with a real, living person. This response, we would suggest, is the essence of the literary response.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND LIFE REVIEW

We can best illustrate the intersection between formal writing and the process of life review with two remarkable case histories, the first from the discipline of anthropology, and the second from the more familiar field of English Education.

Jacob is an exceptionally successful and well-respected elder in Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) study of a Jewish Community Center for senior citizens at Venice Beach in California (a location probably better known to addicts of the eternal re-runs of TV sitcom as the setting for John Ritter's *menage* in *Three's Company*). Jacob is a member of a life-storying group, and uses the opportunity to continue the process of life review, in which he has engaged since his retirement at age 65, some thirty years before. He has already written "two autobiographies, a collection of essays, speeches, letters, short stories, a travel diary, and poems in English and Yiddish, amounting to several hundred pieces." Beginning with his eighty-ninth, he regularly used his birthdays as a public opportunity to "reflect upon his life and revise his interpretation of its sense and

worth." According to Myerhoff, Jacob was continually in the process of constructing a "sacred story, a personal myth," and it is this process, continuing very literally until the day of his death, as he was on stage to celebrate his ninety-fifth birthday, that enabled Jacob to make sense of his existence:

To experience the Self as a stable, continuous being through time, across continents and epochs, despite dramatic physical changes, is especially important to the old, burdened with such vast and disparate memories. Reminiscence is no mere escapist desire to live in the past, as some claim; rather it should be regarded as a major developmental task for the elderly, resulting in the integration that will allow them to age well and die well.

Jacob is a supreme example of a person who used life storying, both oral and written, to achieve this integration of the self.

Finally, let us take this opportunity to celebrate the autobiographical writing of another lifewriter, a very familiar figure to us at this conference, and one whom we have already cited in this paper for his scholarship and research. Last year was James Britton's eightieth birthday, and it is fitting that one, who for four decades has been showing us how people use language as a means of organizing a representation of the world, should show us a little piece of his own re-created world. Britton's (1988) *Record and Recall: A Cretan Memoir* allows us the delightful surprise of meeting in the pages of this book the thirty-two year old Pilot Officer Britton of the Royal Air Force, who describes his experiences during the British retreat and evacuation of the island of Crete in the face of the German invasion of 1941.

This piece of personal history is not to be confused with the war historian's view of military events. Rather, *Record and Recall* is Britton's personal story of how he was

shipped from England to Crete in charge of some fifty airmen of a mobile radar station. Britton tells the story of the ten days of retreat across the mountains to the south shore, where he and a small band of survivors were stranded for two days on a barren beach without food or water, before they could make contact with the Cretans and find their way to the port of Sphakia.

What makes *Record and Recall* doubly interesting is that the story is actually a compendium of memories from various sources: letters written home, a daily diary, an official report, a poem included in a letter, a personal story written a few days after reaching safety in Egypt, a poem written two years after the events, and a very detailed narrative of the last two days, written in a notebook two months later. Britton thus provides a composite picture of memory at work in the reconstruction of past events. Moreover, we see how experiences are transformed by the written word in the various forms of discourse, in what Britton calls a "raid on the storehouse of what must have been," demonstrating all three of his categories of language function: the expressive, transactional, and poetic.

For anyone interested in the art of autobiographical writing, *Record and Recall* provides a lesson in the process of life review undertaken by a writer who is very conscious of the shaping power of memory as it intersects with a variety of documentary sources. There are two struggles in this work. On the surface it is the story of one person's survival of wartime disaster; but at a deeper level we can see the struggle of a person who looks back at a segment of his life in order to understand how he has been shaped by his experiences and how they give importance to his present life. *Record and Recall* shows us a master teacher and author at work in this process of integration--rehearsing, reliving, and re-creating the events of 1941, and we can share and applaud his success in coming to terms with the actions, decisions, and perceptions of his thirty-year-old other self.

THE CELEBRATION OF LIFE

To end our discussion of lifewriting, we would like to share a short piece written last year by Rachel Houghton-Brown on the occasion of her one hundred and first birthday. Rachel wrote her *first* life story when she was eighty-seven.. We were very proud to publish in our anthology this extract from her handwritten note which she composed for the benefit of her family who had gathered to welcome her home from the Extended Care Unit of the UBC Hospital.

February 6th 1988 - 101st Birthday!

Rachel Houghton-Brown

*I am very glad to be home
With my dear family
To celebrate my 101st birthday.
Old age is not a time to be sad:
The needs, doubts and fears of youth
Disappear with the passing years.
It can be the happiest time of life.*

*Old age is like the last act of a play.
The curtain calls are the recollections
Of joyous and happy events
And the many blessings of life enjoyed.*

*Altho the gradually declining years are the most
enjoyable
With the lifespan lengthening as it is,
We must take a stand and resist giving up
When the feeling of old age comes upon us.*

*Exercise of body, mind and spirit is essential;
We are like a stream that stagnates if it stops
running.*

*It is surprising the amount of exercise my
wheelchair makes for me,
Wheeling, reaching, bending, lifting.*

*Taking an interest in local affairs, music,
gardening, politics,
And enjoying the beauties of nature
Keep the mind alert.
What is life if full of care?
There is no time to stand and stare.*

With the knowledge and faith that

*"The soul and God stand sure"
I await the pulling of the curtain between Earth
and Eternity
With calmness and peace.*

The curtain was pulled for Rachel shortly after her last public appearance as an author at a media reception to celebrate the publication of *The Lifewriting Anthology*.

When a reporter asked Rachel if she was going to write more, she pulled a bundle of papers from beneath her wheelchair and said: "You want more? I'm not finished yet."

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